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Grantmaking in the South: An opportunity to support equity and resilience

NCRP's Ryan Schlegel interviewed Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's executive director Justin Maxson and network officer Lavastian Glenn about philanthropy in the South. Among the topics they discussed: foundations' support for social change in the South, how to strengthen partnerships between Southern and national funders,

and what has changed in the South since Lavastian authored an article in the summer 2013 edition of Responsive Philanthropy.¹

Ryan: It's been three years since Lavastian wrote her wonderful piece for *Responsive Philanthropy* about the *As the South Goes*² report, specifically about the urgency of investing more philanthropic dollars into Southern communities. What has changed for the South in those three years?

Justin: National funders are paying more attention to the South. We have more conversations with funders who recognize the need to support the ad-

vancement of economic, social and racial justice.

Three things helped bring this about: First, I think the Movement for Black Lives helped increase the national conversation around race. Second, the deepening demographic shift in the South continues. And third is the growing recognition of economic inequality.

Those three realities have really prompted recognition from national funders to realize that all of those things collide so directly and systematically in the South. If you care about those issues, you have to figure out how to be in the South.

Obviously there is a lot of room between where (continued on page 12)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Grantmaking in the South

(continued from page 1)

we are and where we need to be, but I know of five to seven national foundations that are in serious exploration. They have deepened their strategy and investment in the region. That's a positive thing.

Lavastian: Over the last three years, I've had the privilege of working with Grantmakers for Southern Progress (GSP). In traveling around the country and working deeply in the South, the platform of GSP has resonated with many people in philanthropy. There are active conversations and learning among Southern and national funders on developing racial equity or equity lens for their work. I think we've been successful in helping funders identify organizations and networks, actually spend time in the region and begin to break down perceptions about the lack of capacity. However, there's more work to do.

From electoral-, get-out-the-vote- and democracy-focused foundations, there is definitely interest in the South. Part of that increased interest comes from this unusually high-pressure, high-stakes general election and the understanding that shifting demographics hold a lot of promise for new leadership, progressive policy and more inclusive civic discourse. It has been interesting to watch the shift in attitudes about people of color and ideas about what progress looks like versus the "we need to go back to America of the past" attitude.

While all of that plays out in the public sphere, we have several high-profile police shootings of, and racially motivated, violent crimes toward African-American people and people of color. It brings back imagery and memories of the Jim Crow South.

So while there is more conversation in philanthropy about the opportunities to invest in the South, all of our greatest fears about the past are front and center in 2016.



Lavastian Glenn



Justin Maxson

Ryan: The gap that exists between national resources and Southern communities seems to be both about the perception of and the real lack of capacity. Babcock has made a commitment over 20 years to build the capacity of Southern organizations, especially with an eye toward resilience. How can other foundations support that process?

Justin: There is absolutely a perception that the South has less capacity, and clearly the South has capacity challenges. The region has been underfunded for decades. However, between the perception and real challenges is real capacity. It takes patience and a willingness to look underneath the lid in communities, states and networks to find it.

One way to support the process is to fund networks whose work includes building the capacity of their participating organizations. This is a good approach for foundations that do not want to specifically support organizational development.

In my experience, however, organizational development and capacity building are important parts of supporting the work. Organizational support isn't just a separate category; asking a potential grantee about his or her organizational development and its strength is something you can do if you're supporting state policy advocacy, grassroots organizing or economic development work. For any of those strategies, these organizations need organizational support.

Lavastian: Folks doing community and economic development in South Carolina, for example, are hugely under-recognized for their work. They have created a network of community-development entities, working to improve the conditions of people living in their communities.

South Carolina, like many other states, has a particular approach to governance that prides itself on smaller government that does not invest in local communities, not to mention the legacy of overt and structural racism. What these folks have been able to do is create an infrastructure that stands outside of, and is parallel to, the mainstream. When we go to a conference and see 250 people from around the state, the majority of whom are African Americans and people of color, we know they have created that for themselves.

You have to see for yourself to understand the capacity, vision and leadership. I have to give credit to Bernie Mazyck and Michelle Mapp. Both are very smart and passionate but are also entrepreneurial; they know that this is all about making the work better.

Ryan: The South was not founded as an economic democracy. We hear from folks that one of the stumbling blocks that some funders encounter is a misapprehension or a lack of understanding of the power dynamics that play in those communities. How does Babcock approach power dynamics in those communities?

Justin: That's a great question. It's just hard to do. We acknowledge power dynamics in places, but fundamentally we are partner/grantee-led, so we do a lot of listening and ask a lot of questions.

We're looking to support actors who are conscious of the relations of power and have their own theory of change. We're not looking for a logic model, but we're looking for groups to at least be able to say "Here's what we're trying to address; here's how we're going to go about it and why we think we're successful."

We have a fundamental tenet: We aim to work as much as we can with directly impacted people. That starting point generally means that they'll have some version of a power analysis. It's important for us to listen to their stories and their understanding.

We're also very interested in unusual partnerships in which you have grassroots leaders in legitimate collaboration with intermediary organizations or decision-makers where these folks see shared interests and can get important things done.

Power is often central to making things happen in communities, so we listen closely to what our partners say about their strategies, their partners and how they will get their work done. There is usually a great deal of wisdom there.

Ryan: How is Babcock's understanding of what social justice looks like different from the prevailing understanding of national funders? And how is that understanding influenced by Babcock's specific contacts in the South?

Lavastian: We have this deeply held value that states, "We know what we know because of work in the community."

How we move and act as funders in the region is grounded by a sense of humility. And that's not to say that we don't have intelligent folk on staff who can deeply evaluate issues and access research to understand how we can make a difference. We really try to practice what we preach by listening to communities and leadership on the ground. We know that it's their call.

We've learned over the years that investing in people to lead processes in their local contexts brings the most impact and sustainability. As funders, it is really easy to enter into spaces with nonprofits and communities with your own plan to move the needle. We work hard not to enter in that way.

We enter by listening to how a nonprofit leader or network is describing

his or her own ecosystem and analyzing political power and the kind of tools and influence it takes to achieve these goals. If it lines up with our general framework (economic opportunity, civic engagement promoting democracy, accountability to people who are directly affected, etc.), then that's what we invest in.

Justin: As Lavastian said, it's based in a set of values that go pretty deep. We recognize a set of connected structural challenges (racism and other isms, economic inequality, political exclusion, cultural narratives about success), and because we believe the solutions are also complicated, so we generally don't pick an issue or one strategy.

We try to support places where there is opportunity in the context or place and do so in a way that we build resilience and effectiveness overtime. Babcock's vision for change is rooted in a recognition of the complexity that the region faces and an understanding that the most effective solutions aren't one-off responses. This involves support to build resilient organizations and networks and develop strong, multilayer relationships over time. We hope that allows organizations to make progress today and move the needle on longer-term challenges.

The last decade has been tough in the region, particularly politically. It takes a long-term perspective to advance social justice in the region. Partnerships between national funders and regional/local funders is key because we can help interpret context and explore connections to local work.

We recognize that this work is going to take long-term, place-based general support that expects outcomes but also to invest in building capacity such as staffing, organizational development and resources to support innovation.

Ryan: What tools or information do you think funders need to strengthen those

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partnerships and create sustained investment for structural change in the South?

Justin: We need as many examples of capacity and work on the ground as possible. They need to understand that there is capacity. It may look different than the capacity they're used to, and it may need support to be made stronger, but there is significant capacity across the region.

It's not enough to just fund the outcomes. Part of funding outcomes is actually supporting the growth of more resilient

pushing ourselves to understand outcomes and support work that will achieve them. We think building resilient organizations and networks supports both near-term outcomes and longer-term progress on super hard issues. We work to support community and organizational leaders who are working toward both.

Lavastian: We really need tools to help bridge differences. How do you partner with communities and with nonprofit agencies in a way that is equitable, fair

Funders also need vehicles to invest in a way to move money with a shared risk, with opportunities to leverage investment. Equity, by definition, means investing more in places that have less, or have people starting from a different point, all in order to create an equal playing field. What does that mean for philanthropy? That is probably the biggest challenge for folks investing in the South.

A common push-back is that there are just so many needs, and the South is so behind. But if you truly have an equity or racial equity framework in your grantmaking, then it is an easy choice: you invest in those who need it most.

We need to prioritize helping foundations and stakeholders to reframe what progress looks like. If your understanding does not contain an equity lens, then places like the Deep South lose out every time. There is something inherently unjust about that. That is an outside-the-box opportunity we have in philanthropy; we need to show up in places that on paper look like they can't add up but need help nonetheless.

Ryan: I think the last bit that you said resonates most with me. If we say that we can't invest in places under our current framework because they "don't add up," then that's not a problem with those places; that's a problem with our framework.

Lavastian: That's right. ■

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Notes

1. See <http://www.ncrp.org/publications/responsive-pubs/rp-archive/responsive-philanthropy-summer-2013/region-at-the-crossroads>.
2. See www.nfg.org/gsp_south.

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and effective organizations and making the case for integrating organizational support with support for outcomes.

So what are the most effective strategies that national funders can take to best support the work? I think it involves seeking to understand the context in a place, listening well, building relationships and real partnerships and spending enough time to do the previous things well.

While we all need to support work that aims at short-term results, our experience says we are more effective with a slower, deeper approach that builds on the skills and experience of local actors. Patient work that helps funders get a sense of the opportunities and challenges in the region is likely to be much more successful.

The Babcock Foundation believes deeply in outcomes and results. We have a thread of practicality that runs through our work, so our approach to this isn't ideological. It really is the result of our experience.

Our experience shows that, if what you want to do is help generate outcomes in a place with tough challenges, there aren't quick solutions. We are always

and pays attention to the power dynamic? We need more tools, more training and more dedication to develop a racial equity and justice lens.

We need leadership that understands the urgency. One of the things that is really difficult about philanthropy is that it is so slow and takes so long to make decisions. I don't know what can be done about the speed, but there's something to be said for prioritizing work around structural change.

It is so important for us to say, "We're going to make mistakes, but we are going to do this together and will fail forward."

Also, funders need to know the potential funder partners within the region. So, for example, we are part of an effort to organize funders to invest in the Black Belt. It is a historic community that has experienced persistent poverty over the years. And while the community carries a lot of the passion and leadership from the civil rights movement, it has not yet reaped the benefits of all that activism. There is an opportunity to come together with communities and ask how we can support work for deep change here.